

**“ARE WE PRAYING YET?”**

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REV. SUZANNE PAUL

**(READ FROM “NIGHT” BY ELIE WIESEL.**

**PRAYER. THE WORD ITSELF MEANS SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO EACH OF US IN THIS ROOM THIS MORNING. SOME OF US WERE RAISED WITH LOUD, FREE-FORM PRAYERS THAT WENT ON AND ON. OTHERS WERE BROUGHT UP WITH FORMAL PRAYERS IN A BOOK, OFTEN IN OTHER LANGUAGES, LIKE LATIN OR HEBREW OR ARABIC. SOME WERE TAUGHT TO PRAY PRIVATELY BEFORE BED – “NO I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP” – BUT PERHAPS NEVER WENT TO CHURCH OR SYNAGOGUE. OTHERS HAVE ONLY HEARD PUBLIC PRAYER DURING THEIR LIFE – MAYBE FROM SOME SNAZZY SMILING PREACHER ON TELEVISION. A FEW PEOPLE MAY KNOW MORE SUBLIME STATEMENTS ABOUT PRAYER, AS WHEN THE AGNOSTIC PAINTER MATISSE COMPARED HIS OWN COLORFUL WORK TO PRAYER. MANY OF US HAVE USED PRAYER AS A BARGAINING TOOL – I WILL NEVER DO SUCH AND SO AGAIN, I PROMISE, IF ONLY THIS OR THAT WILL OR WON’T HAPPEN. THIS MORNING I WANT US TO THINK ABOUT PRAYER IN A DIFFERENT WAY FROM OUR CHILDHOOD DEFINITIONS – AND SEE IF IT HAS ANY RELEVANCE FOR US NOW AS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS. IF WE CONFINE OUR THINKING ABOUT PRAYER AS WE DID WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN IT IS LIKE SAYING THAT A THIRD GRADE READING LEVEL WILL BE ENOUGH FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL, OR THAT PLAYING WITH TINKER TOYS AS A TOT ENTITLES YOU TO SERVE AS CHIEF ARCHITECT AND ENGINEER FOR THE BUILDING OF A SUSPENSION BRIDGE. SO LET’S BEGIN BY RECOGNIZING THAT THE WORD PRAYER DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY STAND FOR SOMETHING THAT BEGS FOR FAVORS, OR SOMETHING THAT IS FOOLISH, OR A WASTE OF TIME, OR SOMETHING NO DECENT SKEPTIC – LIKE MYSELF – SHOULD EVER CONSIDER AS A POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE. MILOSZ, WHO IS A BRILLIANT AGNOSTIC AND NOBEL PRIZE WINNING POET, WROTE: “YOU ASK ME HOW TO PRAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS NOT. ALL I KNOW IS THAT PRAYER**

CONSTRUCTS A VELVET BRIDGE AND WALKING IT WE ARE ALOFT...ABOVE LANDSCAPES THAT ARE RIPE GOLD, TRANSFORMED BY A MAGIC STOPPING OF THE SUN.” HE ALSO ATTENDS ST. MARY MAGDALEN IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA NOW AND THEN. BUT HE SAYS QUITE CLEARLY IN HIS POEM “YOU ASK ME HOW TO PRAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS NOT.” CLEARLY MILOSZ IS NO BELIEVER – YET HE PRAYS – WHY? I THINK THE ANSWER IS FOUND IN THE NEXT LINE OF THE POEM – “ALL I KNOW IS THAT PRAYER CONSTRUCTS A VELVET BRIDGE AND WALKING IT WE ARE ALOFT...ABOVE LANDSCAPES THAT ARE RIPE GOLD, TRANSFORMED BY A MAGIC STOPPING OF THE SUN.” A MAGIC STOPPING OF THE SUN – BECAUSE WHEN HE PRAYS, HE SEES THE WORLD AS IF THE SUN HAD INDEED STOOD STILL. AS HE PRAYS THE WORLD AROUND HIM STOPS FOR A MOMENT, THE FRENETIC PACE CEASES, THE SUN NO LONGER MOVES WITH SUCH RELENTLESS SWIFTNESS, BUT SEEMS TO STAND STILL AND LIGHT UP THE WORLD IN A WAY HE DID NOT NOTICE BEFORE. HE NO LONGER SAYS – “HOW FAST TIME FLIES!” “WHERE DOES THE TIME GO?” “THE OLDER I GET, THE FASTER THINGS GET” HIS PRAYER, INSTEAD, IS A PAUSE, A NOTICING, A PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT IS HAPPENING BOTH AROUND HIM AND INSIDE OF HIM. IT IS ALSO A RECOGNITION THAT HIS NEEDS ARE NOT THE ONLY NEEDS AND THAT HE IS NOT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD. THE LATE MAY SARTON, WHO WAS A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST AGREES WITH MILOSZ’ PERSPECTIVE ON PRAYER. “IT IS A MISTAKE,” SHE WROTE, “TO BELIEVE THAT RELIGION CONCERNS” A GOD AT ALL. RELIGION AIMED AT SUCH A GOD IS “OUR OWN INVENTION” SHE WRITES, OUR OWN LONGING FOR ACCEPTANCE, ORDER AND RELIABILITY. SHE ASSERTS THAT HER GOD NEVER ANSWERS PRAYERS. “NOT TO OUR PRAYERS HAVE YOU BEEN MERCIFUL,” SHE WRITES. “WE NEVER MEET YOUR FACE, WE SEEK YOU BUT DO NOT FIND YOU, AND YOU OFFER NO SUGGESTIONS.” SO WHAT ELSE IS NEW? PRAYERS ARE NOT SPELLS TO BE ANSWERED WITH MAGIC RESULTS. I THINK MOST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS SUPPORT THE SARTON AND MILOSZ UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER – THE BIBLE HAS DOZENS OF WORDS TRANSLATED AS PRAYER, BUT NONE OF THESE WORDS SUGGEST

ANYTHING AT ALL SIMILAR TO THE WORDS BILLY GRAHAM WOULD OFFER FOR THE US PRESIDENT ON AN INAUGURAL DAY. FOR INSTANCE, HERE ARE SOME OF THE MEANINGS FOR THE WORD PRAYER THAT IS ACTUALLY FOUND IN THE BIBLE – “TO COME UP AGAINST” – “JUDGE ONESELF” – TO ASK QUESTIONS” – “TO EXPRESS NEED” – “TO WISH THAT IT MIGHT BE SO” – “TO COME ALONG CLOSE TO THE SIDE OF” – “TO MEDITATE.” ALL OF THESE DEFINITIONS ARE THE TRUE DEFINITION OF THE WORD PRAYER AS USED IN THE BIBLE – YET NONE OF THE ACTIONS DESCRIBED SOUND LIKE WHAT PEOPLE WHO PRAY ON TELEVISION ARE DOING AT ALL. MILOSZ WRITES: “YOU ASK ME HOW TO PRAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS NOT.” PEOPLE MIGHT SAY, WELL IT’S A PRETTY POEM, BUT THEY ARE STILL WONDERING, PERHAPS “IS MILOSZ JUST PLAYING WORD GAMES. WE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS FIND THE WORD GOD SO FRAUGHT WITH THEOLOGICAL NONSENSE LIKE HELLFIRE AND BRIMSTONE THAT WE CAN NO LONGER EASILY USE THE WORD. WE UU’S SAY THAT WE CAN HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WONDER AND MYSTERY OF THE WORLD WITHOUT USING THE WORD GOD. WE UU’S SAY THAT WE UNDERSTAND THE FEELINGS THAT MANY HAVE ATTACHED TO THE WORD GOD BUT THAT WE DO NOT FOR ONE MINUTE BELIEVE THAT SUCH FEELINGS NEED TO BE SYMBOLIZED INTO SOME PERSONAL SUPER-BEING WHO LIVES OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSE AND KNOCKS US AROUND FOR SPORT IN BETWEEN OUR FLEETING MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES OF WONDER AND AWE. AND YET – OUR CHOSEN RELIGION NEEDS TO FEED OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE – WHAT LANGUAGE DO WE USE? WHAT MEDIUM IS ACCEPTABLE AND RELEVANT? I OFTEN USE THE WORD “SPIRIT” OR “LOVE” TO REPLACE THE TRADITIONAL USE OF THE WORD GOD. WHAT IS THE TITLE OF ONE OF OUR FAVORITE UU HYMNS? “SPIRIT OF LIFE” – TO WHAT OR WHOM ARE WE SINGING ABOUT? I BELIEVE THAT THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF GOD AND PRAYER SHOULD HAVE FADED AWAY TEN SECONDS AFTER AUSCHWITZ WAS BUILT, BUT SOMEHOW IT DIDN’T. REMEMBER WHAT SARTON SAYS: PRAYER IS NOT ABOUT PETITIONING AN ALMIGHTY GOD AND IT’S NOT ABOUT RELIGION. PRAYER, IT SEEMS TO ME, DOES NOT HAVE TO BE ADDRESS TO GOD, OR TO LOVE, OR

TO ANYTHING. PRAYER DOES NOT HAVE TO BE VERBAL, SPOKEN OR WRITTEN. SARTON SAYS THAT IT CAN BE A “WORK OF ART.” WHILE ON OUR VACATION LAST WEEK ON SANIBEL ISLAND, CHARLIE AND I DISCOVERED THAT THERE WAS A CONCERT BEING GIVEN BY THE SANIBEL MUSIC FESTIVAL AT THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH. WE WENT ON TUESDAY EVENING AND HEARD THE MOST WONDERFUL YOUNG PIANIST FROM KOREA. THE PIECES SHE HAD SELECTED FOR THE CONCERT WERE FROM THE OLD MASTERS AND A COUPLE OF NEWER, CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS. BUT THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE EVENING WAS HER CHOPIN – IT WAS MAGNIFICENT. I SAT IN THAT PEW AND GAVE PRAYERS OF THANKS – THANKS FOR THE VACATION, THE CONCERT, AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO HEAR SOMETHING SO BEAUTIFUL. MY PRAYERS WERE NONVERBAL AND CERTAINLY NOT DIRECTED TOWARD ANYONE – JUST MY OWN PRIVATE PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING. EVEN SILENT MEDITATION CAN BE A FORM OF PRAYER. IN FACT, FOR 1500 YEARS SUCH SILENCE HAS BEEN CALLED CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN THE EASTERN TRADITION. BUDDHIST LANGUAGE THAT CALLS SUCH LONG SILENCES MEDITATION IS ACTUALLY RELATIVELY NEW HERE IN THE WEST. AFTER I READ THE VERBAL PART OF OUR MEDITATION TIME DURING SERVICES, WE FOLLOW IT WITH SILENT MEDITATION AND THEN MUSIC FOR MEDITATION. ALL OF THIS IS DESIGNED TO GIVE US TIME TO “PRAY” IN OUR UNIQUE UU WAY. IN THE END, THE WORDS WE USE DON’T MATTER – THE EXPERIENCE DOES. WHATEVER ACTION, WORDS, POSTURE, GESTURE OR STRUCTURE HELPS US TO TRANSCEND OUR OWN LIMITED UNDERSTANDINGS OF OUR SELVES, THAT’S A GOOD PRAYER IN MY BOOK. WHATEVER CUTS THROUGH OUR DEFENSIVENESS, WHETHER IT’S DISGUISED AS A SENSE OF WORTHLESSNESS, OR ELSE A SENSE OF ARROGANCE, IS A GREAT PRAYER. WE PRAY, I THINK, ANY TIME WE EMBRACE LIFE WITH THE AUTHORITY AND POWER GIVEN TO US. A PRAY CAN BE ANYTHING – A WORK OF ART, A TIME OF SILENCE, OR A BEAUTIFULLY PERFORMED CHOPIN. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THERE IS REALLY NO COMPELLING EVIDENCE THAT ANY PRAYER, HOWEVER SINCERE, CHANGES OTHER PEOPLE’S MINDS, OR MOVES

THE UNIVERSE AROUND. BUT EXPERIENCE TELLS ME THAT PRAYER CAN HELP GIVE US STRENGTH TO GO FORWARD WHEN THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ANY OTHER WAY. PRAYER CAN MAKE US CLEAR ON OUR WANTS, OUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS, AND HOW MUCH WE DON'T CONTROL. WE WILL ALWAYS HAVE THE LOUDMOUTHS WITH US – PEOPLE LIKE JERRY FALWELL CLAIMING THAT GOD NEVER HEARD THE PRAYER OF A JEW. AND, PRAYING TO GOD, OR THE SPIRIT OF LIFE, WHATEVER, WON'T HELP YOU PASS A TEST IF YOU HAVE NOT STUDIED. IT WILL NOT GROW BACK AN AMPUTATED LEG, RAISE THE DEAD, OR CREATE GOLD COINS OUT OF THIN AIR FOR THE POOR OR EVEN THE GREEDY. IT CAN, HOWEVER, WHETHER WITH FIXED WORDS IN PRAYER BOOKS, MADE-UP WORDS IN THE SILENT INNER MIND, A SIMPLE PAUSE, A BIT OF PAINTING OR TENDER LOVEMAKING, A JOURNAL ENTRY, OR A FEW MOMENTS THINKING ABOUT THE POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF A DREAM...HELP US TO KNOW OUR NEEDS, FACE OUR PETTINESS, ENLARGE OUR COMPASSION, HELP US TO BE LESS CRITICAL OF SELF AND OTHERS, EASE OUR BUILT-UP STRESS, UNLOAD OUR NEED FOR CONTROL, OR SHOW US FOR WHAT WE ARE: MORTALS IN A MYSTERIOUS UNIVERSE WHO NONETHELESS CAN GROW MORE LOVING, MORE PEACEFUL, LESS CONTROLLING AND LESS PANICKED EACH AND EVERY DAY. PRAYER IN SHORT IS ONE OF THE MOST HUMAN THINGS WE CAN DO; AND SINCE WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, ISN'T IT WONDERFUL WE CAN DO SO MUCH? SO BE IT.

SOURCES USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS SERMON:

“NIGHT” BY ELIE WIESEL

“OF PRAYER” BY MAY SARTON

“WHY USE THE WORD PRAYER?” BY REV. MARK BELLETINI